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The Meaning of פָּסַח.

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THE only assured meaning for the Hebrew verb פָּסַח is 'to leap, to limp'; the former of these senses it has in 1 Ki. 18²⁶ and 1 Ki. 18²¹, the latter in 2 S. 4⁴. In 1 Ki. 18²⁶ the priests of Baal leap (that is, dance) **עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ**, 'at (or, about) the altar,' and the verb probably expresses a ritual performance. The connection suggests that the sense in 1 Ki. 18²¹ is the same. How long, exclaims Elijah, will you be **עַל שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִים**? how long will you continue to dance about (or, leap over) the two 'ס? However this enigmatical word **סַעֲפִים** may be treated, the probability is that the reference in the question is to ritual honors paid to two rival deities. The פָּסַח of Is. 31⁵ is difficult; the text of the verse has suffered (the Perfs. must in any case be changed to Infs. Abs.) In the two pairs of Infs. at the end the first form, **יִגְן**, suggests for the third place a stem = 'protect,' and this sense cannot be found in פָּסַח; the rendering 'pass over or by' (Aq., Sym., Th., Vulg., RV) is inappropriate (it is probably taken from Ex. 12), and 'save' (Sept.), 'help' (Pesh., Syr.), 'deliver' (Targ.), seem to be guesses from the connection; 'spare' = 'pass by' (Ges., Stade, *al.*) is not here appropriate — the point in the passage is not the exemption of Israel from suffering, nor its deliverance from danger, but its protection against enemies. The פָּסַח is apparently a corrupt form, for which one might suggest **הִפָּח**, used in Dt. 33¹² of the protection of a bird's outspread wings; in our verse also the figure is derived from birds, but the emendation **הִפָּח** may hold even if the **כַּצְפָּרִים עֲפַת** be thrown out as spurious. In the other passages in which the verb occurs (Ex. 12^{13. 23. 27}) the meaning may well be 'leap.' Yahweh, it is said, will spring or jump **עַל בְּתָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** or **עַל הַפֶּתַח** or **עַל יְדֵיכֶם**, by the doors and houses, but he will not enter, while, on the other hand, he (or his destroying angel) did enter the houses of the Egyptians. A verb meaning 'leap' seems, it is true, not particularly appropriate in such a description. But the narrative is an artificial one; its object is to

give the origin of the פסח feast, and the verb is employed in order to explain the etymology of the noun—if the feast is פסח, it is because Yahweh פסח. The verb was thus a necessity; but it is possible that the ritual movement which the verb expressed was regarded as appropriate to the deed of the destroying deity or angel. From the connection the Versions naturally rendered it as = ‘pass by or over’; but Sept. in two places has σκεπάζειν, with which we may compare its σκιάζει in Dt. 33¹² (where Theod. has σκεπάσει).

If it is thus made probable that the verb expresses a ritual motion, the noun will naturally mean ‘dance.’ This sense is mentioned as conceivable in Ges. *Thes.*, but is not approved. There seems, however, nothing improbable in the supposition that the old nomadic Hebrew Spring Festival should be called ‘the dance,’ this dance being the principal ritual ceremony of the year; the lamb offered would then be ‘the lamb or sacrifice of the pesah,’ and finally the term פסח would come to designate the feast or the lamb. Such a festival would naturally be connected with the offering of firstborn animals (cf. Ex. 34¹⁹); but the lamb sacrificed at a joyous nomadic feast would probably not be looked on as a substitute for men, and would not be called ‘a lamb of exemption.’¹

The other Semitic languages throw no decisive light on the Hebrew word. The stem does not occur in Aramaic. In Arabic we have *fasuḥa*, ‘to be spacious’; *fasaḥa*, ‘to take long steps in walking’; *fash*, ‘safe-conduct’ (= that which gives one space or ease in travel); *fasaḥa*, ‘to separate’ (= put a space between), ‘dislocate’; *faṣaḥa*, ‘to separate the legs.’ In Ethiopic the verb = ‘to be joyous’ (from ‘dance’?), and there is a noun = ‘gorge, hill.’ The meaning of the name of the city on the Euphrates, תפסח (Thapsacus), is uncertain; it is explained (*e.g.* in Ges., *Thes.*) as = ‘ford,’ from פסח, ‘pass over,’ but Xenophon (*Anab.* i. 4, 18) reports the people of the city as saying that before the time of his visit the river had never been crossed on foot; and, if boats were used, the river might be crossed anywhere. The meaning of the stem is perhaps ‘space, separation’; striding, dancing, limping, would then be regarded as modes of separating the legs.

¹ The expression חג הפסח occurs only in Ex. 34²⁵, where we should probably read, with Wellhausen, חג; but in 2 Chr. 35¹⁸ the term פסח is used in the sense of feast.